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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/NCE; PLEASE PASS TO NSC FOR ADAM STERLING

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SUBJECT: PRECEDENTED VIOLENCE: DEMONSTRATIONS RETURN ...
BUT CHANGE LITTLE

REF: BUDAPEST 1756 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: P/E COUNSELOR ERIC V. GAUDIOSI; REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Violence returned to the streets of Budapest as intermittent clashes broke out between the authorities and anti-government protestors October 22. The demonstrations were far less serious in duration and intensity than the protests of last fall and this spring) due largely to a combination of inclement weather, better preparation by the authorities, and clear calls for restraint by the opposition.

Laszlo Torockai, leader of the "64 Counties Movement," remains in custody following his arrest on October 22. As our contacts survey the landscape afterwards, there is a sense across the spectrum that the demonstrations will not change the political dynamic (and that the political elite cannot marshal the consensus to prevent further violence.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS

12. (C) Speaking at the Budapest Opera House on the evening of October 22 as police blocked an attempt by anti-government demonstrators to march toward the event, Prime Minister Gyurcsany called on Hungarians to "dare to live in freedom," warning that "freedom and happiness are not gifts."

13. (C) Addressing a party rally on the afternoon of the 23rd, FIDESZ leader Viktor Orban denounced both the government's policies and) critically - the use of violence in opposing them. Calling for the creation of a Hungary which "opens doors to villagers and not just the children of millionaires," he emphasized the importance of an alliance between the middle class and the disadvantaged. Echoing criticism of the police by President Solyom, Orban warned that "police chiefs and politicians are wrong in thinking they can escape retribution" for their actions. In sharp criticism of "the East," Orban called for Hungary to "join the 21st century" by rejecting "the industrial production of lies, institutional corruption, mafia methods, and social crisis." As a senior lay official of the Lutheran Church told us afterwards, Orban's speech was "equal parts anti-violence and anti-Russian."

(Note: Estimates of attendance at the rally vary widely, from the police estimate of 30,000 to the party's claim of 250,000. Referring to the driving rain throughout his speech, a tired but exuberant Orban joked afterwards that "I've never addressed so many umbrellas in my life." End note.)

PRIVATE REACTIONS

14. (C) Though he appeared drawn during official ceremonies on October 23, when he was heckled by demonstrators calling for his resignation, visitors who saw Gyurcsany on the 24th describe him as energized, engaged, and undeterred. As

centrist political commentator Zoltan Kiszelly tells us, "even the weakest Gyurcsany is stronger than the strongest Medgyessey."

15. (C) MSzP MP Attila Mesterhazy, who worked for Gyurcsany at the Ministry of Youth and Sport (and who has provided testimony in the continuing "Zuschlag scandal"), tells us that the party is circling the wagons (reftel). Looking back on the past two days, Mesterhazy commented on October 24 that "I'm sad it happened, glad it wasn't worse (and convinced that nothing has changed." He predicts that the party will put aside its differences over the PM's anti-corruption proposals (reftel) in the face of the challenge from FIDESZ. "We always knew this year would be rough," he maintains, "but the opposition must understand that we will dedicate ourselves 150 percent to the government." "FIDESZ has fallen in love with Orban," he concludes, "but the MSzP will fall in line behind Gyurcsany."

SET CYCLE TO AGITATE

16. (C) Kiszelly, an advisor to the Hungarian Democratic Forum, agrees that the demonstrations will have little lasting impact on the political dynamic. He believes Hungary has fallen into the cycle of "a permanent campaign," with the parties using the upcoming referenda and the 2009 European Parliament Elections as guideposts on the road to the 2010 national elections. "Gyurcsany has no time and Orban has no patience," he concludes, "one must act and the other can't wait." Each needs the other as an enemy, he believes, and he sees the parties gradually questioning whether they need either one.

17. (C) Leaders of Hungary's historic churches were similarly

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somber in discussing the situation October 24. They see the government seriously hampered by public questions as to its credibility and its legitimacy, and fear that there is no national consensus to resist the deep divide in the political debate and the decline in civil society.

18. (C) Comment: Arrests and injuries were relatively low, and the authorities appear to have acted with professionalism and restraint, including in the arrest of Toroczkai. This is good news, as is the clear distinction the vast majority of the demonstrators have made between their protests and the small but visible minority of skinheads involved in the violence. The bad news is that this violent element, though small in number, demonstrated a new level of sophistication, deploying Molotov cocktails and disabling a police water cannon. The worse news is that every holiday for over a year has seen serious clashes, and that Hungarians can no longer use the phrase "unprecedented violence." If both sides remain undeterred, so too do they appear unable to control the prospect of continued violence in Hungarian politics. End Comment.
FOLEY